

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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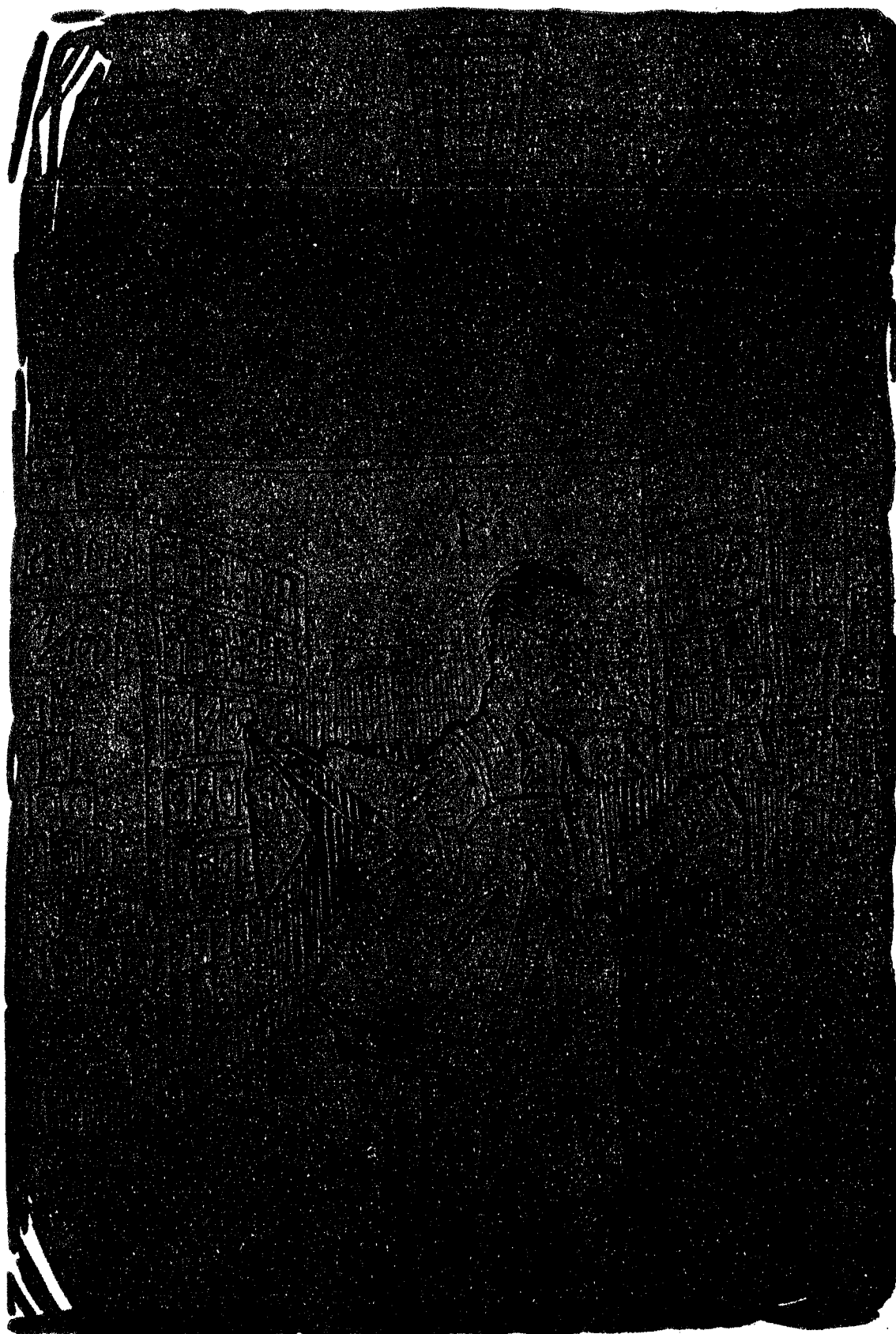
RICHARD E. DECKER, Publisher

G. F. FOSTER, Editor

VICTORIA S. BENHAM, Associate Editor

PAT HITCHCOCK, Associate Editor

MARGUERITE BLAIR DEACON, Art Director

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In globe circling, one may encounter some incredibly strange people; in books, one can select his own companions.



UNFORTUNATELY the elastic band broke. It was an ordinary black mask which is slipped over the upper part of the face. I had purchased it at a novelty store the day before, but evidently it had been on the shelves for a long time. I sighed as it fluttered to the floor, but I kept the gun steady.

The bartender and the four patrons stared at me. My Uncle Eldridge did not stare. He closed his eyes.

Well, I thought wearily, I might just as well go through with it. I spoke to the bartender. "Empty

the till into this paper bag. And do not attempt anything rash. I will kill you if you do."

He rang up a No Sale and did as he was told. My uncle and the other patrons had their hands in the air. Two of them wore sport shirts. The other two were in suit-coats and hats, and their eyes were narrow as they watched me. I had the feeling they were just waiting for the slightest lack of attention on my part.

I moved the gun in their direction. "Take your wallets out of your pockets and put them on the

bar. But be careful. Very careful."

They did as I directed, including my uncle. I dropped the wallets into the paper bag. "Now all of you stand with your faces against the wall. And keep your hands up."

The bartender came from around the bar and joined the others.

I took the paper bag and backed toward the rear door. On the way I picked up the briefcase my uncle had left on a stool. It contained thousands of dollars.

Outside, I quickly closed the door and began running. It was my intention to travel through a few alleys and then merge into the night street crowds. By the time I reached the first street, I was already puffing. I wasn't used to quite so much exercise.

A squad car was parked at the curb.

I stopped in my tracks.

The two officers appeared to be having cigarettes and idle conversation. Apparently they hadn't noticed me.

I had just about made up my mind to stroll as casually as possible past them, when behind me came the sound of running feet and police whistles. The two policemen looked up and saw me.

I'm afraid I panicked. I dashed across the street and into the next alley. I don't know how many

fences I climbed or how many dark passageways I stumbled through in the next ten minutes. Eventually I threw away the paper bag, but I still clung to the briefcase. From the converging sounds of the police whistles and the whines of the sirens, it appeared to me that the entire police department must have been alerted.

Finally I found myself huddled in the dark corner of an alley, completely out of breath and utterly at a loss about what to do next.

Seventy-five feet ahead, a huge semi-trailer stood parked against the unloading platform at the rear of a supermarket. The driver and two men in white aprons came out of the exit. They appeared to listen to the sirens and then evidently they made up their minds to investigate. They trotted down to the farther end of the alley and stood there looking to the right and the left, trying to pinpoint the excitement.

The lighted doorway seemed to beckon like a sanctuary. I took a deep breath, dashed past the semi, up the stairs of the unloading platform and into the rear of the store.

The area I entered was evidently used for storage, for a wall separated it from the store proper and hundreds of cases of goods were stacked about.

I glanced into the store itself. It

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was lighted, though it was at least an hour after closing. Evidently the men I had seen were the employees who re-stocked the shelves during the night hours.

Where could I hide? Certainly not in the store. My eyes fell on the stack of one-hundred-pound sugar bags that reached almost to the ceiling. There appeared to be some kind of a trap door up there. I scrambled up the bags until I reached it. Apparently it hadn't been opened in years, for it took considerable effort before it yielded and moved up. I pulled myself quickly into the darkness and lay there trying to regain my breath.

After a while I noticed a small shaft of light from a slight crack beside the trapdoor. I put my eye to it and peered down.

The truck driver and the two stockboys returned. Someone called up from the basement. "What was all the noise about?"

The truck driver shrugged. "I don't know. We'll probably read about it in the papers tomorrow."

The men finished unloading the truck by eleven and it was driven away. I crawled to another shaft of light a dozen feet or so farther on and watched as the stockboys wheeled the stacks of cartons to appropriate positions in the aisles. There they cut open the cases, stamped the prices on the individ-

ual cans and boxes, and stacked them on the shelves.

By four o'clock in the morning they had finished. They removed the empty cartons from the aisles and swept up. Before they left the store, they turned out all but a few strategic lights here and there.

I waited another half an hour before I opened the trap door and let myself down. One light had been left on in the rear storeroom and I could see a telephone on the wall. I went to it and dialed.

My uncle recognized my voice immediately. "You fool!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "The elastic band broke. But don't worry. I read somewhere that witnesses are very unreliable, and probably the people in the bar gave five different descriptions of me. And with yours, that would be six."

"You idiot," Uncle Eldridge said. "I had to *identify* you."

"Identify me? I don't understand."

"Look," he said, "it just so happened that two of the people in the bar were off-duty detectives. The second your mask fell, they had your face fixed solid in their minds. So what could I do? From the size of the army chasing you, I thought they'd get you for sure. And then what could I say? That I hadn't been able to recognize my own nephew? I had to protect my-

self and think about you later."

I felt exceedingly disappointed.

"What will I do now?"

"Where are you?"

"In a supermarket."

He swore.

"It's all right," I said. "The place is closed and nobody knows I'm here. I could probably hide here for days."

"Have you got the briefcase?"

"Yes."

"Then stay put. I'll think of something. I'll have to get you out of town tomorrow. Out of the state, maybe the country."

"But, Uncle," I said. "I don't like traveling. As a matter of fact, I detest it."

"I don't care what you detest." He was quiet for a few seconds. "What really worries me is what I will tell Big Mac now."

Over the phone, I thought I heard the buzzer of Uncle Eldridge's apartment and I wondered who would be calling on him at that hour of the morning. His voice became tense. "Look, stay put. Don't call me for a couple of days." He hung up.

I put the receiver back on the hook and went to the employees' lavatory where I washed the dust and grime from my face.

I would have to stay here at least forty-eight hours and that meant I ought to provide myself with

some food. I put on one of the white aprons hanging on a peg and picked up an empty carton. If some early morning passerby happened to see me in the store, he would probably think I was one of the stockboys.

A supermarket these days seems to be a combination grocery store, meat market, drugstore, variety shop, and considerably more. I wandered through the aisles feeling almost like a small boy released in a candy shop. I supplied myself with the essentials—milk, bread, and cold cuts and a few other items, including an imported Edam.

I also picked up a flashlight and batteries. By the time I ascended the stack of sugar bags, my box was rather heavy. I closed the trapdoor behind me and turned on the flashlight.

The area I stood in appeared to be approximately nine feet high, twenty feet in depth, and stretched across the entire width of the store. Apparently another establishment had preceded the supermarket in this building, and this space had been used for storage. But now it was empty and thick with dust.

The beam of my flashlight located a number of empty light sockets on the ceiling. I decided I might as well get some light bulbs too. I was about to lift the trap-

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door when I heard a noise down below. I turned off my flashlight and put my eye to the crack.

The rear door opened slowly and a rather thin man cautiously peered in. Then he pocketed his key, entered, and closed the door behind him. He took the precaution of making certain that he was the only person in the building. Then he emptied several large trash boxes against one wall. He removed a candle from his pocket, lit it, and set it among the scrap paper at the base of the pile. He stepped back, viewed the arrangement and smiled.

My eyes widened. A firebug! The candle would burn down to the trash in half an hour or so and the store would soon be ablaze.

He regarded his handiwork once again and then quietly let himself out the back door.

I waited five minutes and then descended. I extinguished the candle and threw it aside. Really, I thought, the incredibly strange people who inhabit this earth!

I went into the store and got some light bulbs and a broom. After eating, I swept my loft a bit. Then I extinguished the lights and lay down on the floor, using the briefcase as a pillow. I closed my eyes and attempted to sleep.

Uncle Eldridge is a collector and he works for Big Mac. I don't

know exactly what it's all about, but he goes to different places in the city at night and each one of them gives him money.

Why had he chosen me for this particular scheme? I would have considered myself a most unlikely candidate. I suppose it was because we are related and he thought he could turn to me in time of trouble.

"There'll be at least thirty thousand in the briefcase," Uncle Eldridge had said. "And five of that is yours. You could use five thousand, couldn't you? Maybe travel a little?"

But I didn't care for travel. On my yearly vacation I go nowhere except to the library and back to my one-room apartment.

"No, Uncle," I said. "I wouldn't want any of the money."

His eyes flickered. "Well, thanks, Fred. As a matter of fact, I owe the syndicate thirty thousand, not twenty-five. The extra five will square things right up to the zero mark."

"How could you possibly owe that much money?"

He shrugged. "Just one of those things that happen, Fred. The horses all run against me. So now I got to cover or be covered, if you know what I mean."

"But I'd think that surely Big Mac would give one of his own employees more time to pay the

money back? Did you ask him?"

Uncle Eldridge cleared his throat. "It's like this, Fred. I didn't do the betting with Big Mac. I went down to St. Louis weekends and that's where I owe it." He patted me on the shoulder. "You and I have nobody else in this world but ourselves. You can't let me down, Fred. It means my life, and I'm not kidding."

I sighed. "All right. But frankly I dread the entire thing."

And now I lay here in the darkness. I am a bookkeeper. I rise at seven. I shower, I shave, I dress, I prepare my own breakfast. At eight I leave for work. It is a journey which requires almost an hour and four transfers. At six I am back in my apartment. There follows another hour for making and eating the evening meal.

And then seven to eleven, I read, I listen to music, and I think. Four hours out of every twenty-four, I live.

"It'll be easy," Uncle Eldridge had said. "You just walk in, point the gun, and take everybody's wallet. And my briefcase."

"But you don't intend to tell the police there was nearly thirty thousand dollars in the briefcase?"

"Certainly not. They'll start asking questions about how I happened to be carrying all that kind of money and that could lead to

trouble. All they got to know is that it was a simple bar hold-up and the briefcase went with my wallet."

"What will you tell Big Mac?"

"The same thing. It was an ordinary heist and I was unlucky enough to be there. And if he don't swallow that, I'll remind him that a lot of punks know I'm a collector and it could be one of them decided to make a strike."

"And you think he'll believe that?"

"Look," Uncle Eldridge said. "In his business you got to think suspicious and I expect him to. So he'll brood over three things. One: Was it just a hold-up? Two: Or was it really a hi-jack job by some punk who knew the score? And three: Is the collector trying to pull something?"

"And when he gets to number three?"

"He might even get a little physical. But I can take a few bumps for thirty grand, and I'll keep blinking innocent like he never saw before. So he'll remember that I been working for him three years and I been clean. Finally he'll say to himself, 'All right. I'll let it go this time. But if anything like this happens again, the blood's going to flow.'"

"He'll do that after losing thirty thousand dollars?"

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Uncle Eldridge snorted. "To him thirty grand is toothpick money. The only thing that might really bother him is the principle of the thing—like somebody in the organization having the nerve to rob him."

I became aware of the sound of voices below and went to the peephole which gave me a panoramic view of the entire store. It was almost eight and various clerks were arriving to start the day.

The hours which followed were long, though I did catnap often. At nine in the evening the supermarket closed and, as in the previous night, the stockboys took over and worked until four in the morning.

After they left, I went downstairs. I washed up and donned the white apron. I made several trips from the store to my sanctuary, during which I transferred more food, an extension cord, a small table lamp, a bridge table, and a folding chair. I browsed a bit at the magazine and bookstand and selected half a dozen pocket books. My eyes turned to the newspaper stacks and I saw my picture on the front page of one of them.

The article consisted of two columns down at the bottom of the page. *Nephew Robs Uncle, Two Detectives*. It told about what had

happened and how the two detectives were now suspended, pending an investigation.

There was a quote by Uncle Eldridge. "I don't know what got into the boy. He's been trying to borrow a couple of hundred from me for the last month, but I had to turn him down. He got pretty mad about it and maybe he thought he'd get the money this way. All I had was about twenty bucks but he could have had that if I'd known he was so desperate."

I was upstairs arranging the extension cord and the lamp when I heard the noise below. I switched off the lights and crept quietly to the trapdoor.

It was that man again. He glared about, then once again, he emptied the trash containers against the wall. This time he lit two candles and placed them in the midst of the paper. He moved about, apparently testing for drafts, and then satisfied, he left.

I sighed, went down, and snuffed out the two candles. I searched through the manager's desk until I found his name, address, and phone number, and then I dialed. "Mr. Nelson?"

From the muddle of his voice, it was obvious he had been awakened. "Yeah?"

"Sir," I said. "I'm afraid someone is attempting to burn down

your store. You better investigate."

He growled. "Is this some kind of a practical joke? You have any idea what time this is?"

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "But this is almost the only time of the day I can call. And it isn't a practical joke."

He seemed to wake up. "Who is this?"

"Just say I am a friend of the supermarket. This individual has already made two attempts to burn down your store. Somehow they failed. But I have the suspicion he will try again tomorrow. Somewhere around five o'clock in the morning, I believe." I hung up and went back upstairs.

During the day and evening, I read two books. I lay down to sleep at ten and woke about three in the morning, a bit stiff. The floor is not exactly the most comfortable place to sleep. I went to the trapdoor, removed the plug, and looked down.

The stockboys moved about quite industriously, because the manager was present, I imagine. In a corner, he conferred with two uniformed policemen and two other men, possibly detectives.

At four o'clock the stockboys had finished and they left. The manager and the policemen began arranging places of concealment for themselves.

One of the detectives clambered up the sugar stack. For a moment I thought we looked eye to eye, and that all was lost. But he turned his back to the trapdoor, arranged several of the sacks in the form of a barricade and crouched behind them.

All of us waited. By my watch, it was five after five when the rear door was unlocked and opened.

It was the punctual firebug, and this time he had apparently lost faith in candles. He carried a gasoline can, and he appeared to be exceedingly vexed. Once again he piled trash against the wall. He poured gasoline on the accumulation and reached into his pocket. He brought out a book of matches.

Directly below me the detective rose to his feet. "Hold it! This is the police! You're under arrest!"

The police converged upon the unfortunate individual, and within a matter of seconds the bewildered man was handcuffed. One of the officers observed the manager's astonishment. "You know him?"

The manager nodded. "I fired him for loafing on the job."

By the time the excitement had died down and everyone had gone, it was almost daylight. I went down and dialed Uncle Eldridge.

"Why didn't you call?" he demanded.

"You told me not to."

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"Well, never mind that now. Where are you?"

"Still in the supermarket."

"I mean which one? What's the address?"

I scratched my head. "I don't know the address, and there don't seem to be any numbers on the show windows."

"You can't be too far from Eighth and Hadley. That's where the bar was. So listen. I want you to go over to Ninth, between Hadley and Atkinson. Wait in the alley on the even numbered side of the street. And don't forget the briefcase."

I thought I heard someone coughing while Uncle Eldridge was speaking. "Are you alone? I heard somebody cough."

"It's the TV," he said. "One of them early morning programs."

I looked up at the window high in the storeroom. "It's just about daylight, Uncle. Don't you think there's a good chance the police might pick me up if I went out now? Ninth and Hadley could be a dozen blocks from here."

He didn't answer for a second and I thought I heard the TV in the background again. Then he said, "All right, we'll play it safe and certain. You be there tomorrow when it's still dark. What time can you make it?"

"I think five o'clock would be

about the right time," I said. "The stockboys don't quit until four or a little after."

"Be there," Uncle Eldridge said, and he hung up.

The next morning the stockboys quit at their usual time. I waited ten minutes and then picked up the briefcase.

The phone downstairs rang. I glanced about to see if I'd left anything, then turned off the lights, and opened the trap door. I went down the sugar bags and to the door.

The phone was still ringing. I was about to leave anyway, so why not? I picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

There was a slight delay, then, "Is that you, Fred?"

"Yes," I said. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't. I just looked in the phone book and called every supermarket around Hadley. But luckily I got to you in time."

"I'm just about to leave, Uncle."

"Forget that. Some of Big Mac's boys would be waiting to pick you up and what they got in mind for you is fatal."

"But, Uncle, you were the one who told me to . . ."

"Look, Fred, when you got a couple of guys lighting matches and not for cigarettes, you get to telling them the truth eventually."

"You told them about us?"

"Not exactly. I said I didn't know you were going to pull the heist, and that I was going to talk you into bringing back the money."

"And Big Mac believed you?"

"I wouldn't bet a dime on it. But, at least, he put me on the shelf until he could get his hands on you." Uncle Eldridge was talking fast. "They left Red Bronson to see that I stayed put, but Red's attention wandered. Right now he's on the floor of my apartment wrapped up with all the clothesline I could steal from my landlady. Now that I know where you are, I'll pick you up in five minutes. I'm only a few blocks from there. Meet me at the rear of the store."

I sat down on some cartons and waited. I heard the car pull into the alley and stop, the motor idling. I pressed the bar that unlocked the rear door from the inside. It swung open and the stop at its base lowered and held it ajar.

Uncle Eldridge had his car parked at the loading platform and he was alone.

I stooped down and handed him the briefcase through the open window. "Where will we go?"

He shrugged. "How do I know? The world's a big place."

I stared out into the darkness.

"Hurry it up," Uncle Eldridge snapped. "We haven't got all day."

I wondered what would happen now. A thousand miles away, would I get another bookkeeping job and live four hours a day? And then I shook my head. "No. You go on."

He frowned. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm not going with you."

He regarded me for a few seconds. "All right. Have it your way. I haven't got time to argue. But I always did think you were a little nuts." He put the car into gear and it roared down the alley.

I went back into the store and closed and locked the rear door. Upstairs, I turned on the lamp and picked up a book.

Yes, the world was a big place, much too big for me. But here it was warm and just my size.

